DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 081 314 HE 004 445

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TITLE Empire State College Learning Contracts. Report of the President's Advisory Committee on Academic Quality.
INSTITUTION State Univ. of New York, Saratoga Springs. Empire State Coll.
PUB DATE 73
NOTE 8p.

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.65 HC-$3.29
DESCRIPTORS Contracts; *Educational Administration; Experimental Programs; *External Degree Programs; *Higher Education; *Performance Contracts; Program Descriptions; Undergraduate Study; Universities; *University Extension
IDENTIFIERS *Empire State College

ABSTRACT

This document focuses on improving the writing and execution of learning contracts at Empire State College. Emphasis is placed on student purposes and background, organization of learning contracts, continuity and incrementability, diversity and variety, unity and intensiveness, compatibility with the discipline, time requirements, bibliography and other learning materials, mentor role, evaluation, and self-inquiry. (MJM)

ED 081314

Empire State College Learning Contracts

Report of the President's Advisory Committee on Academic Quality

INTRODUCTION

Intellectual and institutional accountability in the educational activity of Empire State College are addressed through Learning Contracts. This document focuses upon the task of improving the writing and execution of Contracts.

Considering the very special institutional context of learning at Empire State College, it is not enough to assert that the intellectual soundness of our educational activity must simply be the responsibility of individual members of the faculty. We need to acknowledge that learning operations at Empire State College are framed in a particular context. The Learning Contract, as a pedagogical instrument, has no immediate parallels with the course descriptions in conventional departmental settings. The mentor is asked to describe the learning operation in more detail than does the professor in a conventional college. At the same time, he is often engaged in learning activities which are unique, which resist classification and which often engage the mentor at the edge of his competency. Moreover the individual mentor at Empire State College is required to design a much larger part of the student's studies than is a single faculty member in a conventional departmental setting.

Where mentors are called upon to operate outside their specific area of competence they will need to be able to turn to other resources. These may range widely but they must have one attribute in common: They must represent intellectually sound learning processes designed by persons into whose specific areas of competence they fall. These learning processes may include tutorial relationships, courses offered at other institutions, correspondence material, special membership programs, programs developed through Empire State College and others.

Another factor which will determine the particular content and role of the Contract is the substance of the discipline studied. Although the Learning Contract is central to our operation at Empire State and although a generalized format of the Contract can be specified, the content of the Contract and the procedures surrounding it will vary greatly depending upon the nature of the material to be studied and the nature and condition of the person involved in the learning process. Some learning operations require a specified step by step procedure. Others are characterized by a high degree of unpredictability. Thus a Learning Contract in science may very well

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1. Loren Baritz, Irving Kriesberg, William Laidlaw, John Neumaier, Al Schwartz, Angela Li Scholz, Rhoada Wald, Arthur Chickering, Chairman.

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be quite structured and sequential. In contrast, one in the creative arts may, of necessity, be quite open, flexible and subject to development as it progresses. (Memoranda from Angela Li Scholz and Irving Kriesberg discuss these matters in more detail as they apply to science and art, and are available from the Vice President for Academic Affairs upon request.) Of course, even in the case of the most flexible and open Learning Contract the College's responsibility to assist and oversee the student's work remains.

Learning Contracts: Planning and Evaluation

The Learning Contract can be an instrument for helping the student conceptualize and give focus to the work he is doing. It is important to recognize that the "Learning Contract" is a single unit which includes both the initial planning statement and the final Digest and Evaluation. Individual Contracts differ in as many ways as there are differences in student goals, learning resources and approaches among mentors, but to the extent that the concept is valid, all good Learning Contracts probably have some qualities in common. At the most general level, they reflect careful planning and full consideration of the evaluation requirements of the learning experiences that they represent. More specifically, contracts show that attention has been given to the aspects described in the categories below. These dimensions of the learning experience may on occasions be identified in the initial Contract, and on other occasions in the Digest and Evaluation.

Learning Contracts can acknowledge degrees of unpredictability by including the following elements:

1. An initial description of the precise problems on which the student will be working.

2. The time stipulated for that work.

3. After the work is completed a description of that completed work and the evaluation of the learning activity.

Student Purposes and Background

A Learning Contract that makes explicit the long range goals and the specific purposes of a student provides a context within which learning activities and materials can be viewed and understood. The stated goals and purposes serve as guides and reminders to both student and mentor as the Contract proceeds, and they enable other readers to better understand that endeavor.

A knowledge of the student's background is sometimes important to the understanding of the initial Contract. Assumptions about special abilities, strengths or weaknesses may affect a Contract. This background need not be written for each new Contract, but from time to time student or mentor may wish to make modifications and it should always be readily available to the reader.

Organization of Learning Contracts

The organization of the Learning Contract can provide a structure for the student and reduce some of the ambiguity he may experience in the Empire State College learning environment. Clear and coherent relationships

between general purpose and specific goals, between learning activities and evaluation procedures and between student responsibility and mentor responsibility, facilitates learning in some cases and provides for more effective communication among all those concerned.

Readings, writings, field work and other learning activities within a Learning Contract often will be most effective when their relationships to each other are stated and when they are related to goals and purposes. Provision for comparisons of similarities and differences, evaluations and syntheses among their component parts more often lead to higher orders of integrative learning.

Expansion, Continuity and Incrementability

A Learning Contract is a unique part of a student's total program of study. It possesses its own integrity but relates to prior learning and to future possibilities for study. Good learning units carry forward a student's education by suggesting additional disciplines, areas of study and further experiences related to his goals and purposes which may be pursued in a future Contract. A Learning Contract may include several discreet areas of study which need not necessarily be related to each other.

Diversity and Variety, Unity and Intensiveness; Compatibility with the Discipline

Contracts that help the student move toward his goals by experiencing a variety of media and learning activities give him the opportunity to develop and exploit his abilities and his special style of learning. Human interaction, work and field experiences, film, radio, television, in addition to printed materials all have value in learning and may contribute richness through diversity and variety in a Contract. Depth of learning experience is as significant a consideration when addressing unity and intensiveness as breadth when addressing diversity and variety. The particular area of study will determine the scope of each contract but it is important that a student pursue a subject to a degree of complexity and to a level of intensity warranted by that subject itself. Field and work experience for example take on added value when supported by immersion in theory and research findings.

Time Requirements

Special attention needs to be paid to the time demands of learning activities. This is a complex issue requiring continuing consideration. Meanwhile it can be said that decisions about the duration of a Contract and whether it needs to be full- or part-time should consider the nature of the included learning activities, the level of required skills possessed by the student and the time available to the student. The best and most realistic balance possible should be sought in light of the goals of the Contract. It should be remembered that certain kinds of learning activities cannot be spread thin just as others cannot be compressed.

Bibliography and Other Learning Materials and Resources

Bibliographic references selected for inclusion more clearly contribute to the goals and purposes of that plan of study when they are appropriate to the student's background and level of comprehension. The purposes of specific readings and activities should be made clear and the relationships among readings and other learning activities should be explicit. Mentors may want to consider the appropriateness of primary as against secondary sources, historical as against contemporary perspectives and other alternative frames of references. They may want to suggest bridges between theory and practice and bridges between several disciplines. An initial bibliography may serve as a point of departure for the student and mentor to develop a more adequate later bibliography as learning progresses, and as such it should provide a structure for continuing development.

A wide variety of resources to support learning are available to Empire State College students. Among those already mentioned are the various public media, field experiences and supervised work experiences, but many others exist. SUNY Independent Study courses, Empire State College learning programs, now expanding rapidly, courses at other Colleges, corporate, technical and management programs, museum programs and some proprietary school offerings are among other available learning resources. Learning units which extend the wide variety of available resources may better serve students and they are consistent with the mission of Empire State College. Nor do such arrangements violate the professional integrity of the faculty. The structure of Empire State College envisions it's function to go beyond that of a teaching institution only and explore alternative modes of learning for the student.

Mentor Role

Study plans that clearly spell out the expectations and responsibilities of both student and mentor seem most functional. We anticipate an increased use of consultants and tutors to supplement the mentor's capabilities and competencies. Delineation of the role and responsibilities of the mentor shapes the student expectations. Times and purposes of meetings and conferences between mentor and student should be specified in order to help structure the learning activity.

It should be remembered always that a mentor in the learning arrangement needs to consider himself not necessarily as the teacher but that he may instead be the coordinator of the student's education, making available to him as many routes as possible.

Evaluation

Evaluation of learning has several components. First, there is a continuing evaluation which takes place through the student-mentor dialogue. Second, there is the evaluation of the products resulting from the Contract activities. Third, it needs to be realized that the criteria for evaluation itself are constantly evolving.

Fulfillment of a Contract means a student and mentor agree that the purposes of the Contract have been accomplished. This agreement is facilitated when the Contract specifies at the outset what will represent an accomplishment and how it will be observed, but this is not always necessary.

Effectiveness can generally be increased when Learning Contracts specify occasions for evaluations such as conferences, papers and observations as well as the goal-related criteria that will be applied on these occasions. Evaluation can include elements which are oral, written, or performances, which are product- or process-focused, which are objective or subjective; but in all cases these elements should relate to Contract goals and result in evidence that can provide public representation of the student's accomplishment, particularly in the case of the oral examination by the mentor directly. He should make clear the distinction between such a formal examination and an informal discussion. A specific report on such examinations and what is covered should be provided by the mentor or the tutor operating within his competence. Open-ended process-oriented arrangements, sometimes even with no detailed written evaluation, are educationally defensible and even desirable. Where the responsible teacher is in clear command of the subject the oral exchange between the student and the teacher during the process of work and the presentation of completed artifacts approved by the teacher can constitute sufficient evaluation.

CONTRACT SELF-INQUIRY

The following set of questions is attached in hopes that it will be found useful in developing future contracts and study programs. Further, as the contract and evaluation is considered a single unit and as various disciplines are seen to require different methodologies it is expected that contract formats will become more diversified.

The questions below attempt to address the various dimensions of a contract: long-range plans, specific purposes, learning activities and evaluation. They are questions for guiding self-inquiry as we go about the business of developing contracts with our students.

(A) General purposes, plans or aspirations:

1. Do the long-range purposes go beyond Empire State College and attainment of a degree?

2. Is there an understandable focus for a program of study? Are there clearly stated goals or is there a coherent theme suggested?

(B) Specific purposes:

1. What will I see as a product of the contract? Will it be behavior, a thing, or an effect?

2. Do these short-term goals or outcomes make sense in terms of the student's long range plans?

3. Is the student equipped to achieve the stated goals within the contract?

4. Can we provide opportunity to pursue these goals?

5. Will other informed observers understand the expected outcomes?

6. If consistent with the particular area of discipline, do the specific purposes provide for diversity both in topic and in learning activities?

(C) Learning plan and activities:

1. Is the learning plan clear for both student and mentor?

2. Has the whole possible range of learning modes been considered in writing this contract?

3. Are the activities relevant to contract goals and are they manageable? Are they the most reasonable for the purposes, for the student?

4. Does the contract have enough specificity for the student to proceed and enough flexibility to permit the student to explore? Are opportunities to display initiative and creativity presented?

5. Are the activities appropriately demanding for the student's academic status and level of development (e.g. second, fourth or whatever year)?

6. Does the contract reflect in depth and complexity the time duration of the contract?

7. Does the bibliography aid in carrying out the specific objectives of the contract? Does it reflect alternative frames of reference, primary or secondary sources as they are appropriate?

8. Where appropriate are learning resources other than bibliography indicated?

(D) Evaluation:

1. Are appropriate occasions for evaluations provided? Is the frequency suitable?

2. Is that which is to be evaluated (e.g., papers, logs, journals, oral presentations, work samples, test, etc.) clearly described?

3. Are the criteria distinct from the occasions and means of evaluation?

4. How clearly are the criteria described? Do they reflect the objectives of the contract? Are they stated so that student, mentor, and an intelligent other will understand them?

5. Will the results leave "tracks" that will give an informed reviewer an understanding of what the student has accomplished? Is there concrete evidence that learning has taken place?

6. Is the evaluation in the contract related to previous and future contracts?

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The Committee expressly disclaims the intention of constructing guidelines for mentors to follow. It is hoped rather that these observations and questions will stimulate further discussions within the Learning Centers and will lead to increased consciousness of the questions at issue.